Unending Dialogue Between the Past and the Present in Medicine

Firman Lubis
Indonesian History of Medicine Society (Persekin)
Basic question one may ask
- Why study the history of medicine?
- What’s the use of studying it?
- Naive sounding question but important inquiry
- Raised by many colleagues in medical profession: understandable

Some arguments from the perspective of main actors in medicine
History of Medicine

- Has been studied since a long time ago
- Started by scholars both in History and Medicine field
- Branch of Medicine as well as History discipline
- Different perspective and interest
- Different purpose and objective
- Interdisciplinary subject
- Not so popular among medical profession
Focus on organs
The human body as a whole entity
Physical, mental and social: holistic approach including his background and environment
Contribution of other disciplines into Medicine: multidisciplinary
Social sciences and humanities
Health and Development

- Health is a basic need
- Health is part of human rights
- Stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948)
- Basic capital for development (WHO, 2002)
- Social order and justice
- Productivity, economic development
Still struggling to improve the health condition of our people

Unfavourable health indicators

One of the worst in Southeast Asia

Unacceptable high maternal and child mortality

High incidence and prevalence of preventable communicable diseases

MDGs and other international commitments
Since the colonial period in mid 19th century

Known as “People’s Health” or Volksgezondheids

Improving the health of the people, mainly due to economic reason

Epidemics of communicable diseases, affecting rural farmers

Control of small pox, dysentery, typhoid, malaria, plagues, leprosy, yaws, TB, hookworms etc. in many parts of the country
Training of Medical Doctors

- Indigenous medical doctor or dokterdjawa training started in 1851
- Gradually upgraded until full qualified medical doctor
- Paid by and worked for the government
- Distribution of doctors in the villages
- Mainly conducting public health programs
Public Health Program During Colonial Period

- Health propaganda
- Control of communicable diseases
- Vector and rhodent control
- Sanitation and hygiene
- Maternal and Child Health
- School Health program
- Nutrition
- Etc., lots of experience accumulated and many lessons learnt
Disruption throughout almost all of the 1940s
- Second World War and Independence war from the end of 1941 until the end of 1949
- Most of the established health system and infrastructure collapsed
- Newly independent country struggling to revitalize its health program in 1950s
- Shortage of manpower, infrastructure and facilities
Program had to be reinvented due to the disruptions of the 1940s and early 1950s
- Loss of many documents and reports
- New health administrators
- Break of knowledge and experience
- Including in medical education system
- Soughted support from international aids
- “Amnesia” of the past
History of Medicine: Bridging the Past and the Present

- Avoiding reinventing the medical system wheel
- Avoiding “trial and error” approach
- Avoiding waste of time and energy
- Reflect and learn from the past
- Build and improve from past experiences
- Bridging the past and the present

- The importance of the history of medicine!
Training of midwives to improve maternal health in the past

The same period as the training of dokterdjawa

Had to be closed in 1875 due to social-cultural aspects

Crash program training of village midwives in late 1980s to lower maternal and neonatal mortality

Not so successful as predicted
Public Health program should be continuously build and improved based on past experiences

Avoid waste of time and energy to reinvent the medical system wheel, including medical education

Unending dialogue between the past and the present in medicine is a must!
THANK YOU